Opening remarks, Saturday 17 May

I want to begin with thanks. Thanks most immediately to my colleague Leon Wieseltier. Thanks to him for the idea of this gathering, for his sense of the importance of this historical moment.

Thanks to our fellow participants from the West, who set aside their other obligations to come to this special city and this special moment.

Thanks to colleagues from Russia, who by simply accepting this invitation help us all to remain in the normal world of common sense and good will.

Thanks to our western partners, who supported this initiative, very often without the usual formalities. Thanks even more to our Ukrainian partners, who took up the idea of this gathering and made a reality through their energy, dedication, and will.

And thanks above all to our Ukrainian participants who, despite so many other responsibilities, despite so many painful distractions, have come to speak with their colleagues from other countries.

We have participants here from throughout Ukraine, from the west, from Kyiv, but also from the south and east, from Crimea, Odessa, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv.

To you above all I want to express my personal thanks. I am honored and humbled to be in your company. Thank you.

Those of us who have come from the West are not here because we think we know everything about pluralism and freedom. We have come because perhaps we know something, and are sure that we need to know more. We have come because we want to learn from you, from Ukrainians.

We believe, watching from afar, that the Maidan has posed some of the fundamental questions of ethics, politics, and culture. We understand that those of who have experienced these last five months in Ukraine have much to offer to us, on these great matters of common and indeed universal interest.

We know that many Ukrainians have taken risks, and that many Ukrainians have died, for basic political decency. We see that in taking those risks you have done something we have not, and we come to express our admiration.

We hope that in dialogue with you these next few days we will all gain something, and perhaps create something new. We hope that this is a beginning of new acquaintances and new friendships, and that the conversation that we are starting now will continue over the years and even decades to come.
Whether we understand this or not, we in the West cannot do without you, politically and intellectually. Whether we realize this or not, Ukraine is in the middle of all of our preoccupations. We cannot renew our best traditions without you.

Traditions. We hope to do something new here, but I believe too that we are working within a certain tradition, a tradition that is worth sustaining. A tradition of thinking about politics without forgetting the difference between thinking and politics. A tradition that arises from thinkers of the past, from whom in our own humble and no doubt inferior way we can learn.

The lesson for example of Hannah Arendt, that we must think at all times, never stop thinking, precisely when thinking seems impossible, and precisely about what seems unthinkable.

The tradition of Krzysztof Michalski, the founder of the Institute for Human Sciences from which I visit you today, who believed that it was ideas, precisely ideas, that could overcome political divides, not all at once perhaps but with time.

The tradition of Tony Judt, the great historian of Europe of his era, who understood that the West made no sense without the East, and politics no sense without ideas. These two men who died too young were my friends and have been much on my mind as I have organized this gathering.

The traditions of the great Ukrainian historians, who in their different ways recognized a duty of responsibility: Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi who believed that history must include the downtrodden, Vyacheslav Lypyns'kyi who believed that intellectuals should involve themselves in the civic effort of statebuilding, Ivan Rudnyts'kyi who preserved the intellectual history of Ukraine as a European history.

I think as well of the model of Raymond Aron, who understood that intellectuals do not engage themselves for a perfect world, but to prevent the world from becoming worse than it already is. And perhaps above all of that the incomparable east European intellectual, a child of the Russian Empire, Isaiah Berlin, who recognized that moral goods were real and that moral goods were many, and thus that any realistic ethics must begin from pluralism.

Not only in the subjects that we will discuss but in the way that we will discuss them we hope to exemplify pluralism. We will use the languages of these thinkers -- Ukrainian, Russian, French, Polish, German, English. Today for example we will begin with a panel on human rights in the Russian language, continue with a panel on culture after the Maidan in the Ukrainian language, and conclude with a panel on law and corruption in German.
The choices of language have not been made for convenience: on every panel people will be speaking languages that are not their mother tongues, and indeed most of the moderators, including all three of the moderators today, will not be speaking their mother tongues.

We do this as an expression of respect for Ukrainians and other east Europeans who must do the same thing every time they wish to gain the attention of the world. We do this as well as a recognition of the multilingual character of Ukraine. We do this because we believe that plurality is a good thing, including a plurality of languages. This country is the most European of all European countries in its linguistic practices, and I believe that this should be noticed and respected.

We are not interested in national panels. We believe that language is not only a question of identity, but a means towards the universal and the liberating. We are interested in panels of high quality on issues of great importance. The panels are organized not by nationality, but by topic. They bring together Ukrainian and international intellectuals, they bring together people of different backgrounds and disciplines and experiences.

The panels have a certain logic and a certain form, but they are free: the moderator and the participants will be in discussion, in conversation, taking risks. So I cannot tell you any more about what will come next. Or perhaps just one thing.

The next panel, in the Russian language, with Bulgarian, Ukrainian, and Russian participants, will concern human rights. I am very glad to able to introduce its moderator, Ivan Krastev. Ivan is the director of the Center for Liberal Strategies in Sofia and a permanent fellow of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. He is a political scientist and a political thinker of the very highest order. I can think of no one better to begin our discussions.